

Searching for Elizabeth Bishop

By MICHAEL BEZDEK

My search for Elizabeth Bishop in Duxbury began about a dozen years ago when I did an article about a PBS series on the top American poets and was struck by both her talent and her relative obscurity among the featured writers.

My curiosity in poetry in general and in Ms. Bishop in particular was on the ebb when some time later her name came up in discussion and a local resident mentioned she had once written a poem about Duxbury. The person didn't know the name of the piece.

This suggested investigation, and over the years when browsing through books I occasionally made a casual, futile attempt to locate the poem and something about Elizabeth Bishop in Duxbury. Then, recently, laid up with an injury and plenty of time to spare, I went to the Web. I found that indeed there was a poem about Duxbury, although the town was not mentioned in the verse.

It is called *The End of March* and was written in 1975, and included in her last volume, *Geography III* in 1976. In Bishop's papers at Vassar, it is entitled *The End of March, Duxbury*. The poem was



about him, too. It was, as one *London Times* writer called it, "a woeful tale of alcohol, drugs and self-pity."

The chief writer visiting Duxbury at the time Bishop was here was the poet Robert Lowell. A great admirer of Bishop, who influenced his work significantly, Lowell was another tortured, great writer who battled depression and the bottle for much of his life. He took a home in Duxbury with his second wife, writer Elizabeth Hardwick, for a time.

Then there was Bishop, who had been a wandering child for most of her life, her father having died in Worcester before she was a year old and her mother breaking down several years later and being sent to an

ager, who wrote a book about the final era of traveling by the great ships. Lowell, the son of a naval officer, wrote some of his most memorable lines in relation to the sea, such as the famous *The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket*.

Bishop, too, wrote of the sea and shore, often in a reverie about earthly things, such as her both real and surreal dream house of *The End of March*. The poem is often cited as one of her best, and a friend, Ilse Barker of West Sussex, England, who knew Bishop's work intimately, said it was especially important as a focus of bishop's recurring notion of "the poet's house for thinking in." Bishop loved to cook and make house, and Barker says two of the key places in the poet's life were the Duxbury dream house and a home in Brazil, which Barker had visited. Of the Duxbury house and *The End of March*, Barker wrote:

"I have never been on the Massachusetts coast—Duxbury is a mystery to me. But I can walk along that beach any time—on a rainy English day, at night when I can't sleep, and see it, feel that wind freezing

The End of March

By ELIZABETH BISHOP

It was cold and windy, scarcely the day
To take a walk on that long beach.
Everything was withdrawn as far as possible,
Indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken,
Seabirds in ones or twos.
The rackety, icy, offshore wind
Numbed our faces on one side;
Disrupted the formation
Of a lone flight of Canada geese;
And blew back the low, inaudible rollers
In upright, steely mist.

The sky was darker than the water
—it was the color of mutton-fat jade.
Along the wet sand, in rubber boots, we followed
A track of big dog-prints (so big
They were more like lion-prints). Then we came on
lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string,
looping up to the tide-line, down to the water,
over and over. Finally, they did end:
a thick white snarl, man-size, awash,
rising on every wave, a sodden ghost,
falling back sodden, giving up the ghost...
A kite string?—But no kite.

I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream-house,
my crypto-dream-house, that crooked box
set up on pilings, shingled green,
a sort of artichoke of a house, but greener
(boiled with bicarbonate of soda?),
protected from spring tides by a palisade
of—are they railroad ties?
(Many things about this place are dubious.)
I'd like to retire there and do nothing,

vocative find, as was the corollary information on the prominent little circle of friends who brought her to town.

Bishop, as it turns out, had come here often at the invitation of John Malcolm Brinnin and his companion, Bill Read, to whom the poem was dedicated. They had a house here. Brinnin, a poet, prose writer and college professor, was most famous for bringing the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas to America for several tours and writing in graphic detail of Thomas's awful alcoholic dissipation, right up to his final breaths.

Brinnin also brought writers to Duxbury, including Truman Capote, who had used a house on Clark's Island years earlier and wrote there for several summers. Brinnin was a close friend of Capote for decades, and after the latter's death, Brinnin wrote a tell-all book

asylum, never to be seen by Bishop again.

Elizabeth Bishop was raised by relatives, but did have an inheritance that allowed her to attend good schools like Vassar, and to write and travel. An extremely private person, in both her life and what she revealed about herself in her art, she struggled with asthma, drink and love. She wrote sparingly, but well, and her honors included a Pulitzer Prize.

By the 1970s, the peripatetic Bishop, who had left Brazil after 16 years and the breakdown of her longtime companion, was teaching at Harvard, and according to her letters, making frequent trips to Duxbury.

The thing that bound her and her brilliant, troubled band to Duxbury—the town that had inspired Rachel Carson to write her classic *Silent Spring*—was the quiet and the sea. Brinnin was an avid Trans-Atlantic voy-

ager, my face first on one side, then walking back, on the other. Every object is etched in words. It is, for me, almost Bishop's most visual poem. Can't you see the pebbles sticking out of the sand (and casting long shadows during the few minutes the sun is out?) and that hank of raveled rope, the

'...think white snarl, man-size, awash

rising on every wave, a sodden ghost...'

And as you walk on (unless it is too cold as it was the day she wrote of) there is the house for thinking in."

The Duxbury gatherings ended in a rather quick succession of passings. Brinnin sold the Duxbury house and moved to Key West after Read died in 1978. Robert Lowell divorced Elizabeth Hardwick and went to England in the 1970s, and he died in a taxi in New York in 1977. Elizabeth Bishop died in Cambridge in 1979.

The dream house of the Duxbury shore remains, perhaps, and *The End of March*, certainly.

Here, finally, is the poem, with permission of Ms. Bishop's publishers, Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

(Michael Bezdek, a resident of Duxbury, was a longtime news executive with the Associated Press and college lecturer, most recently at Boston University. He is now managing director of a public relations firm, getpress.com)

of nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms.
Look through binoculars, read boring books,
old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,
talk to myself, and, foggy days,
Watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.
At night, a grog a l'americaine.
I'd blaze it with a kitchen match
and lovely diaphanous blue flame
could waver, doubled in the window.
There must be a stove; there is a chimney,
askew, but braced with wires,
and electricity, possibly
—at least, at the back another wire
limply leashes the whole affair
to something off behind the dunes.
A light to read by—perfect! But—impossible.
And that day the wind was much too cold
even to get that far,
and of course the house was boarded up.

On the way back our faces froze on the other side.
The sun came out for just a minute.
For just a minute, set in their bezels of sand,
the drab, damp, scattered stones
were multi-colored,
and all those high enough threw out long shadows,
individual shadows, then pulled them in again.
They could have been teasing the lion sun, except that now he
was behind them
—a sun who'd walked the beach the last low tide,
making those big, majestic paw-prints,
who perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with.

From *Geography III*, 1976